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Brexit, Trump, and 'Methodological Whiteness': On the Misrecognition of Race and Class

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Abstract

The rhetoric of both the Brexit and Trump campaigns was grounded in conceptions of the past as the basis for political claims in the present. Both established the past as constituted by nations that were represented as 'white' into which racialized others had insinuated themselves and gained disproportionate advantage. Hence, the resonant claim that was broadcast primarily to white audiences in each place 'to take our country back'. The politics of both campaigns was also echoed in those social scientific analyses that sought to focus on the 'legitimate' claims of the 'left behind' or those who had come to see themselves as 'strangers in their own land'. The skewing of white majority political action as the action of a more narrowly defined white *working class* served to legitimize analyses that might otherwise have been regarded as racist. In effect, I argue that a pervasive 'methodological whiteness' has distorted social scientific accounts of both Brexit and Trump's election victory and that this needs to be taken account of in our discussion of both phenomena.

Keywords

Race, Class, Methodological Whiteness, Brexit, Trump

I. Brexit, Trump and the Paucity of Class Explanations

'Class' has come increasingly to the fore in explanations of outcomes of the UK referendum on leaving the European Union and the 2016 US Presidential election.¹ In both places, much of the early popular commentary was about how the outcome was a consequence of those who had been 'left behind', or were termed the 'economic-have-nots', delivering a blow against the establishment and against politics as usual (Hobolt 2016; Goodwin and Heath 2016; Inglehart and Norris 2016; Shandil 2016). Further, 'globalization' was presented by the media, politicians, and commentators as the proxy issue against which people, particularly working class people, were voting (Calhoun 2016, Goodwin and Heath 2016, Hobolt 2016).² It was globalization, they argued, that had created the 'left behind' as a consequence of processes of automation, of 'the globalization-induced shock' to manufacturing sectors (Colantone and Stanig 2016), the increasing preponderance of low-wage immigrant (and minority ethnic) labour, and the policies of outsourcing in both the UK and the US that led to jobs moving abroad. It was the cumulative economic consequences of such policies, then, that were said to be responsible for the unexpected victories of both Brexit and Trump and the working class was popularly argued to have delivered this result in both places (Goodwin and Heath 2016, Mckenzie 2017, Turney et al 2017).

However, such claims about a (white) working class backlash are not supported by a thorough analysis of the available empirical evidence either in the UK or the US. As Dorling

(2016) has argued in the context of the UK, the vote to leave the European Union was disproportionately delivered by the propertied, pensioned, well-off, white *middle class* based in southern England, not the northern working class who have been more commonly held responsible for the outcome. Using the Market Research Society six class scheme (albeit which produces a larger proportion of those assigned to the middle-class), Dorling (2016) suggests that '52% of people who voted Leave in the EU referendum lived in the southern half of England, and 59% were in the middle classes, while the proportion of Leave voters in the lowest two social classes was just 24%' (for discussion, see also Shilliam 2017).

Becker *et al* similarly argue, on the basis of analysing the Lord Ashcroft polls that, 'the typical Leave voter is white, middle class and lives in the South of England' (2017: 4). Swales, in turn, identifies three groups that made up the vote to leave: 'affluent Eurosceptics, the older working class, and a smaller group of economically disadvantaged, anti-immigration voters' (2016: 2). Most academic and media attention has been on the smaller group, popularly labelled the 'left behind', and much less on the other Leave voters. As Antonucci *et al* demonstrate (using a two class model of self-identification and income quantiles), while arguments about the 'left behind' have 'widely featured in public and political debates', they found no association between voting leave and 'working class' self-identification (2017: 225). However, 'an association between identifying as middle-class and vote Leave was found' (Antonucci et al 2017: 225). This is not to suggest that many working class people did not vote for Brexit, rather it is to point to a need to address that segment of the population that more plausibly could be argued to have delivered the result and is missing in many analyses of Brexit (see also Flemmen and Savage this issue). This is while recognizing that there are also other explanatory factors for the vote, including as Campos argues, the role of 'political elites, economic elites, and the media' (2016: 36; see also Seaton 2016, Moore and Ramsay 2017).

In the US, the situation is similar, but more pronounced. Trump voters were not only, or even primarily, from the working class. As Gusterson argues, the perception that they were derives from the fact that the 'mainstream media in the United States have put disproportionate weight on a single narrative thread: the role of free trade and factory closings in alienating a postindustrial white working class' (2017: 210). Even if, as he accepts, there is some evidence of a white working class swing in the Rust Belt states, focusing on this aspect alone he suggests, 'distorts and oversimplifies, even inverts, the larger story' (2017: 210). That is, as data from the Pew Research Centre suggests, it was middle class communities that overwhelmingly shifted to Trump in 2016 and were largely responsible for his victory (Igielnik and Kochhar 2016). Only one third of those who voted for Trump came from the lowest income bracket (earning below \$50,000) and, as Silver (2016) has argued, Trump supporters were generally better off than most Americans (see also Rose 2017). Contrary to many understandings, the swing to Trump was carried not so much by the white working class vote, but the vote of the white middle class, including college educated white people.

As Walley has argued, the socio-economic position of Trump voters has been defined in a number of ways – 'occupation, income, wealth, education, status, cultural capital, or family

background' (2017: 232). However, the dominant definition in the context of the Presidential campaign, she suggests, 'has been a crude one, based on a binary distinction between those who have—and do not have—a bachelor's degree' (2017: 232). This has distracted attention from competing explanations and also elides the ways in which race and gender would modify understandings. As any number of commentators have remarked, the empirical category of the 'left behind' understood in terms of socio-economic disadvantage contains within it significant proportions of the Black and minority ethnic population, both in the UK and the US (see Lentin 2017; Andrews 2017). Additionally, these populations are more likely to suffer the effects of austerity and to have worse outcomes in health, education, and employment than white populations (see Jargowsky 2015, Institute of Race Relations 2017, Khan and Shaheen 2017, Li 2017).

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation in the UK, for example, examined the impact of austerity across ethnic groups in 2015 and found that: 'most ethnic groups fared worse during the recession because of higher non-employment, fewer hours worked, lower labour-market earnings, lower self-employment rates, lower self-employment earnings, lower investment income and higher housing costs' (Fisher and Nandi 2015). Similarly, in the US, rates of poverty for African Americans and Hispanics remain far above the national average.³ The Pew Research Centre (2016) reports that 'blacks on average are at least twice as likely as whites to be poor or to be unemployed. Households headed by a black person earn on average little more than half of what the average white households earns. And in terms of their median net worth, white households are about 13 times as wealthy as black households – a gap that has grown wider since the Great Recession.' While these populations also make up the category of the 'left behind', they disproportionately voted to remain in the European Union and voted for Hillary Clinton. As such, to discuss the 'left behind' simply in terms of the white working class, and to rationalize their vote for Brexit and Trump in terms of their economic position, is to conflate socio-economic position with racialized identity while claiming to speak only about class and to repudiate identity politics.

II. The Identity Politics of the 'White Working Class' Rhetoric

Much of the post-Brexit and post-Trump commentary has been prefaced with a criticism of what is presented as the previous privileging of *identity politics* over concerns with *socio-economic inequality*. Campaigns in the UK in the post war period to address issues of racial inequality and the US civil rights movements are re-interpreted as movements of racial identity that enabled ethnic minorities to gain advantages over others in similar positions. As a consequence, the white working class, the argument goes, has been forgotten – their histories silenced and their claims for a redress of the injustices *they face* ignored. This has led, in turn, to calls for racial self-interest by the dominant groups to be seen as legitimate and not to be labelled as racist (Kaufmann 2017). These are some of the strands constituting the basic narrative underpinning media discourses, but they also occur in many social scientific explanations of recent events. As I will go on to demonstrate, this basic narrative is an impoverished one.

Expressed concerns about globalization – the movement of capital – were often euphemisms for concerns about immigration – the movement of labour – and the presence of racial and ethnic minority populations in the UK and US. These concerns were attributed to white working class populations and rationalized on the basis of their precarious socio-economic conditions being linked to, or even produced by, these processes. Yet, the racial and ethnic minorities in the UK and the US were not only recent immigrants, but also longstanding citizens, and many of them also exist in similarly precarious positions. Why was their precarity, and the different political choices they made in relation to that precarity (not voting for Brexit or Trump), not of concern within the debates? Further, as discussed above, the majority of people who voted for Brexit or Trump were not themselves in precarious positions, but firmly within the middle class. The question then emerges that if the data points to the white middle class as delivering Brexit and Trump and if the category of the 'left behind' is also made up of Black and minority ethnic populations, then why have, for the most part, white academics and media commentators sought to focus on the white working class or to mis-describe white middle class experiences as 'working-class'? Or, perhaps more salient for a sociological analysis of the phenomenon, what are the consequences of doing so?

Roediger (2017) suggests that the term 'working class' was barely present in the US presidential campaign with candidates referring instead to the 'middle classes' or 'working families'. It only became a significant rhetorical device in the immediate aftermath of the election result with academics, media commentators, and others seeking to understand the reasons for Trump's victory. While many early comment pieces were written under the rubric of the 'working class', it was clear through their presentation that the focus was primarily, and often solely, on the 'white working class'. Yet, as Roediger (2017) points out, not only was there little substantiation of the definition of 'working-class' – with income levels acting as a crude proxy for class status – there was even less consideration of race (even when it was explicitly named, as in the use of '*white* working class') (see also Walley 2017). The most stark example of this mis-description in the US context is Williams's (2017) recently published book, *White Working Class*, which despite its title is not, as Roediger (2017) comments, 'about the working class in any meaningful sense.'

As Roediger points out, Williams 'expels the poor, wage earning or not, from the ranks of the working class' and uses income and not wealth as her measure. She excludes the bottom third and the top twenty per cent, but makes an exception 'for those making more but not having college degrees' (Roediger 2017). The result, Roediger suggests, is that the working class is defined by Williams as those 'making \$41,005 to \$131,962 annually (median: \$75,144)', a definition that would suggest that this population is better described as 'middle class'. Indeed, the Pew Research Centre in the US defines 'middle-income' households as those 'whose annual income is two-thirds to double the national median, after incomes have been adjusted for household size. In 2014, the national middle-income range was about \$42,000 to \$125,000 annually for a household of three' (Igielnik and Kochhar 2016). The decision to title the book *White Working Class*, then, is best understood as a marketing ploy; as Roediger (2017) comments, the book's editor believed that a title using the terminology 'middle class' would have been confusing to readers and so 'working class' was

used even though, as Williams clarifies, the 'object of study is really the "true middle class"' (cited in Roediger 2017).

In a similar fashion Hochschild, and reviewers of her book, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, which will be discussed shortly, also slip from identifying the concerns of the subjects of her ethnographic research as 'middle class' in interviews prior to the election to then calling these very same people 'working class' in pieces written after the election of Trump (see Wallace-Wells 2016, Hochschild 2016a, Smith 2016). This deliberate misrepresentation of arguments about middle class voters, re-labelled and packaged as being about working class experiences, is not only disingenuous on its own terms. It further displaces structures of racialized inequality from the conversation, seeking, as it does, to make white working class *identity*, and not structural issues of relative advantage and disadvantage, the primary issue in explanations of the outcome (for a discussion of the longer history of this within US sociology, see Bhabra 2014).

Ironically, the return to 'class' via a focus on the white working class shows the purported concern with socio-economic realities actually to be a concern with a new identity politics of race – where 'whiteness' trumps class position. Such a slippage is also demonstrated in the post-Brexit publication of the report by the UK think tank, Policy Exchange, titled, 'Racial Self-Interest is not Racism'. In this report, Kaufmann (2017) seeks to argue that racial self-interest is simply about identifying with one's own, a phenomenon of 'group partiality', that is, a common aspect of group sentiment. All other minority cultures are able to express cultural belonging and so why are white majority populations stigmatized when wishing to do the same, he asks? '[W]e must accept that groups will look out for their cultural, economic and demographic interests' and, however lamentable this might be, he continues, such clannishness 'does not deserve the 'racist' appellation' (2017: 10). Minority partiality, he says, 'is not usually considered racist, [while] whites who express racially self-interested sentiment often are' (Kaufmann 2017: 10).

What Kaufmann fails to understand is that '*minority* partiality' was rarely simply about the cultural expression of group sentiments or issues of diversity or difference. As Ipek Demir (2017) argues, claims by minority citizens occurred in the context of conditions of structured racial inequality and as a means to redress that inequality, a redress argued for in terms of inclusive justice rather than partiality. The claims cannot be disassociated from such concerns. Further, the key criterion of distinction here is one that Kaufmann makes implicitly but does not himself reflect upon, that is, between *minority* and *majority*. To be clear, 'white' people are not a minority in Britain who must make claims together as a group in the face of discrimination and marginalization by a majority other. In democratic societies that are 'empirically' diverse, and where that diversity is represented by a majority group and minority groups, then, as Allen (2005) has argued in the context of the US but applicable also to the UK, what should be the principle that guides the expression of group sentiments such that none dominate others? Should the fundamental basis of such societies be for groups to be able to look out for their own cultural, economic and demographic interests resulting, perhaps, in racially segregated labour markets to achieve such an aim? Or might we consider

other principles by which to guide the ways in which we live together across our differences?

Kaufmann's solution carried through to its logical conclusion would, I suggest, lead us towards what Allen calls, 'a society of hierarchy and domination produced by opportunity hoarding along lines of difference' (2016: 92). This is what it means for majority groups in diverse contexts to look out for their own cultural, economic and demographic interests with no regard for the minorities who live alongside and amongst them – and who have done so historically, even if this is something that also goes unrecognized in such analyses. In this context, arguments such as those made by Kaufmann, that diversity gives rise to declining solidarity, derive from a failure to consider the prior absence of solidarity across racial lines that explains the present distribution of advantages and disadvantages that has come into contention. The difference between minorities and majorities expressing group sentiments is that the sentiments of the former arise in the context of a wish for *inclusion* and *equality*, while those of the latter are a consequence of a wish to *exclude* and to *dominate* (Allen 2005). In the first case, what is attributed as identity politics cannot be separated from an address of inequalities, while in the second case, identity politics are an expression of a wish to maintain those inequalities. The culmination of such group sentiments can be seen in the victories of the Brexit and Trump campaigns.

III. Brexit and the Whitewashing of British History

Goodhart's (2017) book, *The Road to Somewhere*, was published in the aftermath of the victory for the Leave campaign. In it, he argues that Brexit represented the failure of the liberal elite – representing a cosmopolitan 'nowhere' – to acknowledge the legitimate concerns of their own (paler) citizens and instead prioritizing those of its ethnic minority (darker) citizens. The argument, in effect, is presented such that if you are not perceived as belonging to the history of the nation, your concerns ought not to matter in the politics of the present. As Goodhart writes, 'the idea of the equal status of all *national* citizens is now supported by historically unprecedented social provision, usually free to all *insiders*' (2017: 117, italics added). In this way, belonging to the history of the nation is presented as central to the possibility of being acknowledged as being a legitimate part of politics and a legitimate object of policy initiatives in the present. Such arguments, however, profoundly misunderstand the history of Britain, which has never been a nation but an empire, and thus misidentify the extent of the populations who belong historically to the polity and would, as a consequence, be more appropriately understood as '*insiders*'.

As Dummett argues, it was only with the revised British Nationality Act of 1981 that the meaning of 'British' came primarily to signify 'a connection with the United Kingdom alone'; prior to that, 'in common parlance, in school history books and in the law of nationality [British] signified belonging to the British Empire rather than to the island of Britain' (1981: 233). While there may have been a national project within the imperial polity, this was always a racialized project that precisely sought to distinguish the subjects of empire that mattered from those whose lives were deemed to be expendable or less valuable. This form

of imperial reason was continuous with the establishment of national democracy, albeit somewhat ameliorated, at least initially, through the development of modern citizenship in the 1948 British Nationality Act (see Bhambra 2017).

As darker citizens began to travel to the UK in greater numbers and to settle there, a moral panic ensued over 'coloured immigration' with calls to restrict their entry (see Dean 1992, Gish 1968). These people who came as *citizens* were gradually turned into *immigrants* through a series of Commonwealth Immigration Acts (1962, 1968, 1971) that limited the rights of darker citizens to enter the UK (Davison 1966). The quid pro quo for excluding darker citizens from entering the UK was to protect legally those already within the UK from racial discrimination. The Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968 outlawed discrimination in public places on the grounds of colour, race, or ethnic or national origins and the later Act made it illegal to refuse housing, employment, or public services on such grounds. While there had not been legalized racial segregation in the UK, the fact that racial discrimination had not been *illegal* meant that there had been an unofficial colour bar in the areas of housing, employment and education.

The Race Relations Acts, together with the political project of multiculturalism, sought to address these inequalities and gradually brought about a change in the way in which employers and landlords operated, that is, at the very least there was no longer a legal sanction of racial discrimination (see Lester 1987, Khan 2015). This project of redressing previously tolerated inequalities has led some to feel that their relative advantage is under threat. Some ethnographic research, for example, suggests that white working class people *feel* that ethnic minorities have been given advantages at their expense (Hewitt 2005; Gest 2016), despite little empirical data to support such feelings (Rhodes 2010). Improvement in the conditions of others worse off than the white working class decreases their *relative advantage*, but it does not mean that their specific conditions have uniquely *declined*.

The racialized labour markets of the 1950s and 1960s in the UK had maintained good working class jobs for white workers and this advantage was carried for as long as neoliberal policies were kept at bay. With the election of Margaret Thatcher, social housing was sold off, labour conditions deregulated, and unions dismantled leading, over time, to the rise of low-paid, insecure, zero-hour contracts. The fact that some white workers are now experiencing conditions already inhabited by many black and minority ethnic workers raises the concern for many commentators of the *decline* of white workers into these conditions. But what about concern for those workers already in those conditions? Ought not our concern be directed at addressing the *conditions* in which all such workers find themselves? Especially as the evidence does not even seem to support that a 'white working class' has seen its own circumstances decline relative to a migrant population adjacent to and competitive with them. For example, Arnorsson and Zoega suggest that at the time of the referendum, 'the employment rate of UK-born citizens was at a record high, and the participation rate has not declined, which does not, *prima facie*, suggest that UK-born individuals were suffering in terms of employment levels as a result of migration' (2016: 7).

While it is correct that the category 'UK-born citizens' includes darker citizens and second generation migrants and is, therefore, not directly the same as the 'white' population, it is nonetheless indicative of relative disadvantage (see, Catney and Sabater 2015). Arnorsson and Zoega go on to ask the further question of how we fit the result of the referendum 'with the empirical evidence on the effect of immigration if the regions that voted most strongly for leaving are neither the regions where the share of immigrants in the labour force is high nor the regions having large flows of immigration from the E.U.?' (2016: 22). The most likely answer, they suggest, 'is that voters perceive the numbers and effects of immigrants as being much greater than they actually are' (2016: 22). In this context, a focus on who *actually* voted for Brexit (and Trump) would reveal that the opposition to immigration was primarily cultural in character and not based in economic disadvantage. It extended beyond a white working class to include the white middle class of which most sociologists and other commentators are a part.

IV. Trump and the Limits of 'Ethnographic Charity'

Hochschild's (2016b) book, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, was published prior to the election of Trump, but has become a go-to guide to explain the election outcome. Indeed, it was listed by the *New York Times* as one of the six books to read to understand Trump's win and was also highly recommended by the *Boston Globe*.⁴ The book provides ethnographic accounts of members of a self-described white conservative community within Louisiana, for the most part Tea-Party advocates and Republican voters. Interestingly, while Hochschild herself refers to the people she interviewed as 'middle-class' – 'Most of the people I interviewed were middle class'⁵ – the book has been subsequently represented as an account of white working class America in a misrepresentation akin to that outlined by Roediger's review of Williams as discussed above.

Hochschild decided on Louisiana, what she terms as the 'super South', for her ethnographic study as she felt that it was the furthest away from the liberal enclave she otherwise inhabits in Berkeley, California.⁶ The basis of the comparison was the fact that in California one half of white people voted for Obama in 2012 whereas, in Louisiana, only 16% did. She states that she wanted to understand this other 'Tea-Party' America to discover how they came to hold their views, and whether there would be any possibility of making common cause on some issues. As Smith (2016) points out, 'She travelled from her home in Berkeley, California—educated, affluent, liberal, and diverse—to one of the poorest, least educated, most conservative, and most racially divided states in America: Louisiana.'

While the state may be 'one of the poorest, least educated', the people Hochschild interviewed were 'white men and women who live in places that are under pressure but who themselves have middle-class lives' (Wallace-Wells 2016). That is, to quote Wallace-Wells again, 'they were lucky in places where many others were not.' What is particularly disingenuous in Hochschild's presentation of the people she interviewed as coming from 'one of the poorest, least educated' states, is that they themselves were relatively privileged inhabitants within those circumstances. Yet she uses the broader context of the state to

characterize their plight, and completely ignores those sections of the population who actually make up Louisiana's position as at the bottom of most rankings of income, education, and health outcomes.

The state of Louisiana has a population that is 62% white and 32% black or African American. The three wealthiest counties within Louisiana, in terms of median income, are disproportionately white while the poorest are disproportionately black. While close on one fifth of households in Louisiana live in income poverty this is not equally distributed between black and white populations with 12.9% of white households in this situation compared to 33.1% of black households.⁷ The distribution of asset wealth is similarly skewed in favour of the white population and, as the 2009 Human Development Report of Louisiana indicated, 'Whites earning the least have wages and salaries on par with those of African Americans earning the most' (Burd-Sharps, Lewis, and Martins 2009: 27). The unemployment rate is 4.3% for whites, compared to over 10% for the black and African American population.⁸ Over 50% of those living below the poverty line are African American.⁹ Further, the geographical distribution of black and white residents is also of particular significance in relation to issues of pollution that blight the state.

Hochschild (2016a) also points to the fact that Louisiana is home to vast pollution, especially along what has come to be known as 'Cancer Alley'. This, as she states, is an '85-mile strip along the lower Mississippi between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, with some 150 industrial plants *where once there were sugar and cotton plantations*' (italics added). After this brief description, Hochschild goes on to state that Louisiana has the 'nation's second-highest incidence of cancer for men and the fifth-highest rate of male deaths from cancer' and quotes from her white participants who all know someone with cancer. What she does not address is the fact that, given the racial make-up of the state, disproportionately more African Americans live in Cancer Alley than whites and are disproportionately at greater risk of getting and dying from cancer. As James, Jia and Kedia (2012) argue: 'The highest risks ... are clustered in the tracts with the highest proportion of black residents ..., primarily in East Baton Rouge and Orleans Parishes. Eleven of the thirteen high risk tracts in East Baton Rouge Parish have at least 75% black population, and most are well above 90%' (see also Bullard and Wright 2009; Taylor 2014).

While, as Mah (2013) argues, many researchers have noted the extraordinary transformation of this area – 'from slave plantations to petrochemical plants, where poor, rural African-Americans, descended from slaves, continue to live and work in conditions that are dehumanizing and that endanger their lives' (see also Mah 2015) – Hochschild solely laments the conditions of the white middle class with little regard to this broader context. To make matters worse, she identifies affirmative action policies – which were established in the 1960s to address the injustice of the previous two centuries of enslavement and segregation – with a putative decline in the relative position of white middle class Americans and has nothing to say on the historical context that had previously enabled their unjustified (and unjustifiable) positions of superiority and relative advantage.

Both in her book and in the many comment pieces and articles about the book, Hochschild presents a 'deep story' that explains the situation that her participants believe themselves to be in. A deep story, she explains, 'is a *feels-as-if* story ... It removes judgment. It removes fact' (2016b: 135). Hochschild, on the basis of her participants' testimonies, constructs a deep story for them that she then tries out on her 'Tea Party friends to see if they thought it fit their experience. They did' (2016b: 135). The story, she says, has a number of scenes.

First, there is the heroic backstory of standing in line waiting to progress towards the American dream which is just over the brow of the hill. Second, people start cutting in line ahead of you – 'Blacks, women, immigrants, refugees, brown pelicans [sic] – all have cut ahead of you in line. But it's people like *you* who have made this country great. You feel uneasy' (2016b: 139).¹⁰ The third scene is one of betrayal. The person who is supposed to be monitoring the line and ensuring that it is orderly and progresses in a fair manner is, in fact, helping the line-cutters. He is the President – Barack Hussein Obama – and he's on their side and 'the president and his wife are line-cutters themselves' (2016b: 140). This, combined with name-calling (for example, calling them 'rednecks' or 'bigoted', though she does not reflect on her own designation of 'line-cutters' as an instance of 'name-calling'), is what Hochschild suggests makes her participants feel like 'strangers in their own land'. While her chapter on 'the deep story' plays out over seventeen pages in the book, she presents a truncated narrative in her many interviews and comment pieces.

*'You're on a—waiting in line for something you really want at the end: the American dream. You feel a sense of great deserving. You've worked very hard. A lot of these guys were plant workers, pipefitters in the petrochemical—you know, it's tough work. So you've worked really hard. And the line isn't moving. ... Then you see some people cut in line. Well, who were they? They are affirmative action women who would go for formerly all-men's jobs, or affirmative action blacks who have been sponsored and now have access to formerly all-white jobs. It's immigrants. It's refugees. And from—as felt, the line's moving back. Then they see Barack Hussein Obama, who should impartially be monitoring the line, wave to the line cutters. And then you think, "Oh, he's their president and not mine. And, in fact, he's a line cutter. How did he get to Harvard? How did he get to Columbia? Where did he get the money? His mom was a single mom. Wait a minute." And then they begin to feel like strangers in their own land.'*¹¹

Hochschild suggests briefly that race is an essential part of this story, but deals with it by saying that her participants 'felt accused by "the North" of being racist – which, by their own definition, they clearly were not' as they no longer used the 'N-word' (2016b: 146). While she herself goes on to acknowledge that racism is not just about personal attitudes, but also structural arrangements, there is little in the book that addresses the history of the United States as structurally organized around race as the primary category of differentiation. There is little discussion of the emergence of the United States as a slave-society based on the systematic enslavement of Africans and their descendants or of the following century of legalized segregation and structured inequality on the basis of race. Indeed, there is no reflection on the title of the book, *Strangers in their own Land*, of the settler colonial histories that enable European-descended Americans to claim this land as their own. When

she presents the 'line-cutters', she focuses on 'affirmative action blacks', but says nothing about prior injustices, nor does she address the fact that the majority of the beneficiaries of equal treatment have been middle class white women, much like herself and, in fact, many of the group she is studying (see Goodwin 2012; Daniels 2014; Angyal 2016; Katznelson 2017). Of course, the fact that she presents equal treatment as affirmative action is itself revealing.

As Wallace-Wells (2016) set out in his *New Yorker* article on Hochschild's book, the United States had enjoyed a record year of income growth in 2015 with the gains being 'especially dramatic for blacks, Hispanics, and immigrants' and 'weakest for Americans who lived outside of metro areas.' The US Census Bureau report on income and poverty, however, indicates that while the median income of Hispanic whites did increase at a greater extent than that of non-Hispanic whites, the median income of Black households increased at a lower rate and was significantly lower in absolute terms in any event: 'real median income of non-Hispanic White (\$62,950), Black (\$36,898), and Hispanic-origin (\$45,148) households increased 4.4 percent, 4.1 percent, and 6.1 percent, respectively, between 2014 and 2015' (Proctor, Semega, and Kollar 2016: 7). As such, when Wallace-Wells suggests that the relatively well-off white populations of southern Louisiana may be right in their sense that 'minorities and immigrants are passing them in line,' he is playing into the same framework of thinking that suggests that even approaching an equalizing of conditions for African Americans and Hispanics is akin to a decline in the conditions of white Americans.

Concern with the conditions of the white working class, or even the white middle class, in their own terms is not the issue here. What is at issue is the way in which data and arguments are being distorted to support a particular narrative of the exceptional distress of these populations that is not borne out by the evidence. Indeed, a popular narrative in the months preceding the US election was about the increase in 'deaths of despair' of middle-aged white American men. This increase in the mortality rate, it was commonly reported, was higher than that for Black Americans (Donnan 2017). Yet, as is well-documented, it is African Americans who continue to suffer worse health outcomes overall.¹²

Note that the issue here is not that the position of whites is *declining*, simply that they, or their children, may not have the same *relative* position of advantage as they had previously had when the US was based on a legalized system of racial discrimination. Further, the baseline of national median income is startlingly unequal and the percentage increase for Black households is actually lower than that for all other categories. While the numbers would be different in Louisiana, as indicated earlier, the trends would be similar. The issue then seems to be gradually decreasing inequality rather than a decline in the conditions of the white middle class. This is further supported by data that suggests that wages are distributed more evenly in Louisiana when compared to the national average indicating that it is an equalizing of position that is regarded as problematic by some white Americans rather than a decline in its own terms.¹³

The 'deep story', then, is the legitimization of grievances of those who, Hochschild argues, have been 'left behind' by deindustrialization and decades of affirmative action and diversity

politics. What is being described is a relative loss of privilege rather than any real account of serious and systemic economic decline that is uniquely affecting white citizens in the United States. Hochschild herself implicitly acknowledges the segregated history of the US by pointing to the fact that previously there had been all-white jobs – jobs that were not available to African Americans and others because they were not white. This, however, is not presented as the basis for any ‘legitimate grievances’ held by African Americans. Rather, the fact that civil rights undermined the caste privilege previously enjoyed by white workers by enabling African Americans to compete on an ostensible level playing field is presented simply in terms of loss for white workers who, Hochschild proposes, experience the presence of diverse others as ‘line cutters’.

In this way, throughout her book and the many comment pieces, ‘minorities’ are scapegoated for inequalities of material conditions that are increasingly (but not dramatically so) shared by both black and white workers, as well as others. But one group, that of the white middle class, believes that these newly experienced material conditions of greater equivalence are not appropriate to their place. As discussed earlier, the data show that support for Trump (and Brexit) is not primarily grounded in those who are most economically disadvantaged. Nor is it evident that the supporters of each would wish to do something about the disadvantages of others, especially where they are perceived as ‘other’.

V. Conclusion

As I have argued through this article, it is clear that the category of ‘class’ is not being used as a neutral or objective one, but rather as a euphemism for a racialized identity politics that is given legitimacy through this evasion. The presentation of class as an objective category that happens to refer to white workers puts all others outside the operation of history and social processes. It makes exceptional what is in fact central to the configuration of socio-economic hierarchies. Class is not the operation of a race-neutral economic system, but part of an economic system which is deeply racialized.

In these circumstances, the assertion that what matters is class, necessarily has the form of a pernicious identity politics. The identity politics that are associated with the claims of minorities are claims for *equal* rights. A class analysis focusing on white workers (rather than all workers) effectively argues for the resumption of racialized *privileges*. Contra Kaufman and Hochschild, there can be no legitimacy in the latter claim. The test of good faith that class analysis would need to pass is precisely that it begins from the racialized histories of colonialism and enslavement that continue to configure our present and that it be willing to include workers who have been *left out* as well as those who perceive themselves as *left behind*.

The problem, for the most part, rests in an association of class with structural inequality embedded in the economic system and race as merely pointing to social divisions. As such, class is presumed to be more significant than race and to provide a universal category for

inclusive action, in contrast to a supposedly divisive focus on race. However, this analysis fails to acknowledge the ways in which race has been fundamental to the configuration of the modern world and is integral to the very configuration of socio-economic inequalities in the present.

It is beyond time that social scientists engaged honestly with the histories that configure our present and moved away from a methodological nationalism, often coupled with methodological whiteness, that distorts the populations they see as constituting contemporary polities. It is only through an appropriate acknowledgement of the imperial and colonial histories that shape most current Western national polities that we will be able adequately to reckon with the long-standing injustices that increasingly bear down upon us.

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Notes

¹ In this article, I use 'class' to refer to socio-economic position, as defined by income, occupational status, or employment contract. Within the sociological literature, the latter is treated as the most sophisticated position, distinguishing 'class analysis' (of a Weberian or neo-Marxist sort) from the official (in the UK) Government eight class scheme (NS-SEC), the Market Research Society's six class scheme, or from 'income bands' (for example, top 10% of income earners, etc, as used by Piketty (2014) among others). There is, of course, overlap among the definitions in so far as 'income' ('market position') enters into the definition of the different aggregate groups. My argument will apply across these different definitions. Each approach allows a differentiation of the population into economically advantaged and disadvantaged groups and it is this differentiation and its utilization that is the point of the article. In general, the term 'working class' is used by commentators to indicate lower skilled manual workers. For discussion on recent debates regarding how 'class' is used within sociology, see Savage et al (2013), Payne (2013), Dorling (2014), Rollock (2014).

² As Ann Pettifor argued, 'Britain's 'Brexit' vote is but the latest manifestation of popular dissatisfaction with the economists' globalized, marketized society' (2017: 131). Diane Coyle has similarly argued that there is a good case to make 'for arguing that the UK's 'Leave' vote was a vote against globalization rather than a vote specifically against the EU' (2016: 23). Such sentiments were also echoed after Trump's victory which had occurred in the context of an explicit anti-globalization stance (Gardels and Berggruen 2017).

³ <http://www.npc.umich.edu/poverty/>

⁴ https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/books/6-books-to-help-understand-trumps-win.html?_r=0
<https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/2016/11/11/people-look-books-explain-trump-election/R8Slp3Si78ZdpLesiBZIKI/story.html>

⁵ <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/trump-white-blue-collar-supporters>

⁶ https://www.democracynow.org/2016/9/28/what_drives_trump_supporters_sociologist_arlie

⁷ <http://scorecard.assetsandopportunity.org/latest/measure/income-poverty-rate>

⁸ <http://www.epi.org/publication/state-unemployment-rates-by-race-and-ethnicity-at-the-end-of-2015-show-a-plodding-recovery/>

⁹ <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/louisiana/>

¹⁰ Hochschild's mocking inclusion of 'brown pelicans' – a bird prominent in the coastal South and featured as part of the environmental damage following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill – is likely a reference to their removal from the endangered species list in 2009 following federal action. The implication being that even brown pelicans have cut in line to receive federal aid ahead of other more deserving recipients.

¹¹ https://www.democracynow.org/2016/9/28/what_drives_trump_supporters_sociologist_arlie

¹² <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/aahealth/index.html>

¹³ https://datausa.io/profile/geo/louisiana/#income_distro